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AUTHOR White, Kimberly A.
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ABSTRACT

An observational case study was conducted during a 6-month preiod in an effort to determine whether teachers of 4-year-old children had expectations for their students' social behavior and academic performance. Students were in the prekindergarten program of a private child care center. The study also examined the ways in which expectations were relayed to the students and the ways in which students perceived the expectations. A total of 3 teachers and 48 children participated. It was found that the teachers did have expectations for students' social behavior and academic performance. Their expectations were based on information about such variables as children's capabilities, age, maturity, and family situations. The accuracy of the teachers' expectations for their students varied. Children in each group shared similar characteristics and teachers interacted with the grouped children in similar ways. The children were able to perceive and interpret the expectations their teachers had for social behaviors. Implications for preschool teachers and directions for further research are pointed out. (RH)

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# Teacher Expectations for Four-Year-Old Children: A Qualitative Analysis

Kimberly A. White
The University of Georgia
Department of Early Childhood Education

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In the past 10 to 15 years, the focus of instruction has changed from an emphasis on the total child to more of an emphasis on the teaching of academic skills to kindergarten children. In many kindergarten classrooms, the education programs look very much like first grade programs. Consequently, this emphasis on academics in kindergarten has influenced the curriculum in preschools. Teachers of three- and four-year-old children are being pressured by parents as well as preschool administrators to provide children with experiences that will increase the children's readiness for the academic demands of kindergarten. Many parents of three- and four-year-old children tend to push preschool teachers to provide early literacy experiences in an effort to aid their children with learning to read before entrance into kindergarten (Spodek, Saracho, & Davis, 1987).

With the increased academic emphasis in preschool programs serving younger children, the expectations of the teachers may have been influenced without consideration of children's developmental characteristics and abilities. Currently, some public schools across the nation are operating programs for four-year-old children within their elementary schools. This new responsibility for public school systems is becoming an emerging trend. As the academic pressure continues to mount, will pre-kindergarten programs for four-year-olds in public schools be able to nurture the developing children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs while maintaining a developmentally

appropriate curriculum? Will four-year-old children's right to grow in an environment that is free from academic pressures be upheld in these emerging programs for will the children be encouraged to read and perform basic skills before they are developmentally ready to perform? How will teachers of four-year-old children adjust their expectations? These questions are crucial when considering the implementation of academically oriented programs with four-year-old children.

Teacher Expectations

The effects that teacher expectations can have on their students' academic achievement and behavior has been studied over the past two decades, producing evidence of the self-fulfilling prophecy notion first examined by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) in their Oak School Experiment. The findings, which were presented in their book Pygmalion in the Classroom, has been supported by countless studies including Rist (1970) and Brophy and Good (1970;1974). The majority of teacher expectation research has been conducted with elementary students, however a few studies were conducted in the middle school (Ashton & Webb, 1986), high school (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore & Ouston, 1979), and college classrooms (Haynes & Johnson, 1983). Research examining teacher expectations for four-year-old children has not been reported. It is important that the issues of expectations for younger children and the existence of self-fulfilling prophecies be explored because if the pattern of negative expectations begins before children enter kindergarten, their

future academic success may be influenced before formal schooling begins.

Many teachers are unaware of how their expectations for children's performance may influence their behavior, performance, and feelings about themselves. The formation of self-fulfilling prophecies may occur when teachers expect too little from children who have the capability to successfully perform, or when they expect and reinforce inappropriate behavior. These negative teacher expectation effects may produce long-lasting feelings of low self-esteem and incompetence in kindergarten children (Poteat, Ironsmith, & Bullock, 1986). Positive expectations for children are usually reinforced as children perform and behave as expected (Brophy & Evertson, 1981). Teacher expectations have the potential to foster or hinder children's academic and social success.

Purpose of the Study

Research focusing on teacher's expectations for four-year-old children has not been reported in the literature, however, studies examining children's self-concept development (Bee & Mitchell, 1984; Bullock, 1988; Cauley & Tyler, 1989) and social development (Bullock, 1988; Poteat, Ironsmith & Bullock, 1986) in relation to teacher's beliefs and behaviors have been reported, providing a basis for this investigation into teacher's expectations for four-year-old children.

The purpose of this study was to examine if teachers of four-year-old children enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program in

a private child care center held expectations for their students. The study also examined how the expectations were relayed to the students and how the students perceived the expectations.

The specific research questions that guided the observational study were: (1) Do teachers have expectations for four-year-old children? (2) Upon what information are the expectations based? (3) What is the nature of these expectations? (4) How are the expectations relayed to the children? (5) Are the children aware of their teachers' expectations? These questions were intended to be broad to allow for a comprehensive description of teacher's expectations for four-year-old children from both the teacher's and the children's perspectives.

## METHODOLOGY

The design of this study which examined teacher expectations for four-year-old children is an observational case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The major data-gathering technique was participant observation and I was the primary data collection instrument. The purpose of a qualitative case study is to provide a rich description of the event or situation being studied (Merriam, 1988; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This interpretive study focused on the interactions that occurred between the teachers and their students in order to better understand and explain the phenomenon of teacher expectations.

Setting

The study took place in a private, for-profit day care center located in a mid-sized university community in the Southeastern United States. Infants through kindergarten children from middle-class homes were served in this facility. This site was chosen because it was known in the community as having one of the most academically oriented pre-kindergarten programs which served four-year-old children. I felt it was necessary to examine teacher-child interactions in this type of program in order to extend the line of research on teacher expectations from the elementary grades to preschool.

Participants

Three teachers and 48 children (28 boys and 20 girls) participated in the study. The children ranged in age from 4 years 0 months to 4 years 11 months. The racial composition was as follows: 40 Caucasian, 5 African-American, 2 Eastern Indian, and 1 Asian. The teachers were Caucasian females. Two of the teachers were beginning teachers, graduating from a technical school child development program two months before the study began. The veteran preschool teacher held no formal certifications or degrees. None of the teachers were state certified.

In order to separate the children into three classes at the beginning of the school year (late August), the teachers listed all of the four-year-old children in order according to their chronological age. This list was then divided into three groups

and then were perceived by the teachers to be ability groups and taught as such. The oldest children were the top group and the youngest children were the low group. The decisions to move some children "upward" was made based upon a child's age, not ability.

Data Collection

Data collection took place from the beginning of September until the end of February. I visited the center on 60 occasions and spend approximately 140 hours observing interactions and participating in discussions with the teachers and children.

To begin the study, I conducted an open-ended interview with Molly during the first week of school. During this interview, I asked her to "tell me anything I may need to know about each child in order to better understand the interactions I will witness." I also asked her to predict each child's future kindergarten achievement, a task that was very difficult because of the time of the year. I would repeat this question months later to allow her to update this prediction.

After the interview, I observed the interactions in Molly's class for four weeks. Observations generally occurred during the morning group time (approximately 90 minutes) when intended academic interactions were scheduled. On several occasions, I also observed interactions in the early morning hours while children were arriving, during playground time, lunch, naps, and afternoon free play. In the field notes I recorded interactions initiated by the teacher, interactions initiated by the children and the teachers' subsequent responses, and children's

interactions among their classmates.

When I reached the point that I was not observing new interactions between Molly and her children, I began the interview and observation process with Leslie, and then with Tina. Because of the physical openness of the classrooms, I had observed and recorded outstanding occurrences I witnessed with Leslie and Tina while observing Molly. These additional pieces of data were collected throughout the study and were used as supporting data.

Teacher prediction of student achievement. After I finished observing in each classroom, I asked each teacher to rank order their children in terms of their predictions for kindergarten achievement. The student whom the teacher felt would be most successful in kindergarten was ranked as number one and the rest of the children were ranked accordingly. The data from this activity was then compared with the observed interactions and data collected from the interviews with the teachers.

Types of students. In order to better understand how each teacher perceived her children, I asked the teachers to categorize their students based upon the descriptions of these types of students identified by Silberman (1969); attachment, concern, indifference and rejection students. The teachers were then asked to identify children who shared the characteristics of the "problem students" identified by Rohrkemper and Brophy (1983); Failure syndrome, underachiever, low achiever, perfectionist, hostile aggressive, passive aggressive, defiant,

hyperactive, short attention span/distractible, immature, rejected by peers, and shy or withdrawn. However, the teachers were not told of the "problem student" labels. All of this information was used in conjunction with observational and interview data to aid in my classification of children whom the teachers liked and disliked.

Student academic evaluations. The teachers assessed each student according to a center-developed instrument. The children were assessed individually over a period of days from late October through the first of December. The children's nap time was used for this assessment purpose. The areas assessed were cognitive abilities, language skills, large and small motor skills, and social skills. I used the results from these assessments later to compare children within the classes (or ability groups), and to identify the accuracy of the teacher's expectations. During the exit interviews, the teachers referred to performance on the assessment to support their predictions for kindergarten achievement.

Exit interviews with teachers. Interviews were conducted with each teacher at the end of observational data collection. The interviews occurred during nap time. As with the initial interview, the teachers were asked to predict how each child will perform in kindergarten. I also asked them to discuss changes they have observed in their children since September.

Interviewing young children. The success of any ethnographic research study depends on the researcher's ability

to gain clear understandings of the knowledge that "insiders" use to make sense of their world (Hatch, 1990). Permission was granted from the parents of only sixteen children. However, the children ranged in age, behavior patterns, and observed academic performance. These sixteen children became a sample of the larger four-year-old population in the study center.

The interviews were informal in nature. During the morning free time, approximately one hour while children continued to arrive, I interacted with the children individually or in small groups. While the children were engaged in an activity, I sat with them and began to play. I felt it was most important to establish a rapport with the children. By building a rapport in an outgoing play context, one can get a glimpse of the thought processes and feelings of a child that are difficult to obtain any other way (Martin, 1986).

As each child felt more comfortable with me, I would begin to ask questions about typical activities and expected behavior. For example, if we were playing with wooden puzzles on the floor, I would ask, "What are we supposed to do with these?", "What would happen if I were to move the puzzles pieces over here and play?", and "Do we have to put the puzzle together? Would it be all right if we stacked the pieces to build a tower?". The children's responses to these kinds of questions enabled me to get a glimpse of their understanding of classroom processes, rules, and expectations for material manipulation. Embedding ethnographic questions in a larger activity that is already

familiar to the children is the easiest and one of the most productive ways to elicit insightful information from young children (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986; Anderson & Adams, 1985; Mecca, 1989). By asking questions in this manner, or playing "dumb", the children often gave excellent explanations about the rules of the classroom and more specifically, for how their world operates.

Data Analysis

Relationships among categories of interactions were discovered by using the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis for each class was kept separately and the data was synthesized in order to develop a theory to describe teacher expectations for four-year-old children.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study was conducted from early September through February thus lacking a longitudinal perspective from the beginning to the end of the school year.
2. Observations focused mainly on the academic group work in the mornings, however observations did occur at various other times of the day.
3. I was the primary data collection instrument and the results are based upon my interpretations of the classroom interactions.

## RESULTS

The findings will be addressed in terms of the themes that emerged from the data. The themes are as follows:

(1) How teachers relay their expectations to four-year-old children; (2) differential expectations for groups of children;

(3) the accuracy of the teacher's expectations; and

(4) the children's awareness of the teacher's expectations.

### Theme One: How teachers relay their expectations to four-year-old children

The nature of the expectations that teachers held for four-year-old children ranged from being supportive, encouraging, helpful and positive to being unsupportive, discouraging, helpful and negative. Based upon the observational data, Table 1 shows the categories and properties emerged which explain how teachers communicate their expectations for children's social behavior and academic performance. The number of teachers that exhibited the properties are noted.

Table 1 Categories and Properties of Interactions

Teacher Communication

- Non-verbal communication (All)
- Directives (All)
- Relay specific expectations (All)
- Show affection (2)
- Encourage verbal communication (2)
- Tone of voice (2)
- Sarcasm (2)
- Encouragement (1)

Behavior Management

- Threats and warnings (All)
- Consequences (All)
- Behavior management techniques (1)

- Punish the group for the misbehavior of one child (1)
- Explain reasons for teacher's behavior (1)
- Gave special privileges because of behavior (1)
- Lecture child (1)

Teacher-Student Interactions (exhibited by all teachers)

- Differential treatment (positive and negative)
- Inconsistency
- Teacher helping behaviors
- Teachers listens to and reacts to tattles
- Teacher hurry child
- Teacher ignores child's attempt to interact
- Child ignores teacher's directive

Correct Behavior Verbally

- Statement to correct behavior (All)
- Question to correct behavior (All)
- Ask child question to regain attention (2)

Correct Behavior Socially

- Draw the attention of the group to a child (All)
- Stop an activity to redirect or correct behavior (All)
- Address the group to correct the behavior of one or a few (2)
- Use the behavior or work of some children as an example (2)

Correct Behavior Physically (exhibited by all teachers)

- Move children to another location
- Use of physical contact or force

Child Responsibility

- Give child choice to participate in activity (All)
- Hold children responsible for their behavior (1)
- Ask children to run errands (1)

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Based upon the differences in interaction patterns between the teachers and children, categories of children became apparent which leads into Theme Two.

Theme Two: Differential Expectations for Groups of Children

From the data collected during the entrance interview, observations of interactions between teachers and their children,

and the teachers' categorizations of children, distinctions between the children emerged. There are children whom the teachers like, dislike, interact with inconsistently, and children with whom they do not interact. I have defined an interaction as being any communication attempt (including non-verbal communication) initiated by a teacher or a child, and the subsequent response. For the children within each category, I compared the teachers' descriptions of each child, the child's academic ability, the observed interactions, and the teacher's identification of the child as being an attachment, concern, indifferent or rejection child.

Of the 48 study children, 7 children (all boys) fell into the category of the children the teachers liked. They were all described by their teachers as being above average in ability, socially well-adjusted, and well-behaved. The teachers interacted with these children in the following ways: praised their work and behavior; showed affection to them; used their work and behavior as positive examples for the group; addressed the group to correct the inappropriate behavior of these children, being careful not the single them out; and ignored their involvement in misbehavior when other children were involved (positive differential treatment).

The group of children the teachers disliked consisted of 9 boys and 9 girls and were all described by their teachers as having behavior problems, social problems, and as a group, ranged in perceived academic ability. The teachers interacted with

these children in the following ways: ignored the children's attempts to interact and in turn these children ignored the teacher's directives; corrected behavior by drawing the group's attention to the child's misbehavior; made physical contact to correct behavior; used causal threats and warnings to correct behavior; punished misbehavior by isolation; used a harsh tone of voice when correcting behavior; used sarcasm; had differential expectations for work; did not give any help or assistance when needed; and singled the children out for punishment when other children were also involved in the misbehavior (negative differential treatment).

There were no similarities among the descriptions and perceptions of the 12 children (9 boys and 3 girls) that the teachers interacted with in an inconsistent manner. Each of the teachers interacted with these children in different ways. The interactions described for the children whom teachers liked and disliked were witnessed with the children the teachers interacted with inconsistently.

All of the 11 children with whom the teachers did not interact (3 boys and 8 girls) were all described by their teachers as being bright, above average in ability, quiet, and well-behaved. The actual ability levels of a few of these children were average to below average. For a few children, the teachers adjusted their expectations to the child's actual ability but they tended to hold onto their too high inaccurate expectations, even after the administration of the student

assessment instrument. This finding leads into theme three which examines the accuracy of the teacher's expectations.

Theme Three: The Accuracy of the Teacher's Expectations

From the entrance interview data and subsequent observations, the following categories of child characteristics emerged which are viewed as information teachers used to base their expectations: (1) Previous experience or knowledge about the child, (2) information about and interactions with the child's parents, (3) the child's personality traits, (4) the child's perceived social skills, and (5) the child's perceived ability. The categories were referred to by all of the teachers. Other characteristics of the children were mentioned by one or two of the teachers. The teacher's expectations for each child were formed in part by an interplay between a few or several of the categories listed in Table 2 and reaffirmed by the interactions with the child.

Table 2

Categories and Properties of Child Characteristics

Background Information

- no prior information
- known child previously
- no prior day care experience
- came from another day care center

Family Background

- no information known about family situation
- parent's marital status
- family situations
- parental occupation
- parental discipline of child (too lenient, too strict)
- parent supportive of teacher
- parent helps or does not help child with skills

- child has older siblings and teacher believes child receives extra help

Child Personality

- happy child
- quiet
- sensitive
- shy
- spoiled
- neat kid
- sweet
- stubborn
- babied at home
- whiney and clingy

Social Behavior

- over-socializes
- well-behaved
- cries for attention
- talks too much
- too advanced
- dramatic
- plays rough

Academic Ability

- descriptions range from "extremely bright" to "severe learning problems"

Ethnicity

- African-American
- American Indian
- Eastern Indian
- Chines

Attendance

- absent frequently
- arrives late, difficult to teach
- sporadic attendance

Age and Maturity

- young (related to immaturity)
- ability (in relation to age)

Physical Characteristics

- small for age (looks like an elf)
- large for age (looks like a football player)
- speech impediment

Work Habits

- sloppy, scribbles
- needs directions often
- difficulty listening
- asks questions, eager
- short attention span
- difficulty sitting still

The teachers of four-year-old children adjusted their expectations for individual children according to the child's

age. This was first reflected in the grouping procedures that occurred at the beginning of the school year. The children were grouped according to their ages and then the groups were taught as ability groups. The oldest children were taught as the "high" group because they were thought to be the brightest children and were expected to perform and behave accordingly. The youngest children were taught as the "low" group. Because they were younger, they were also thought to be the most socially immature. The teacher of the youngest group told me on several occasions that she expected less from her children because they were younger. The children who fell in between comprised the middle group. The activities planned for each group were similar in theme but differed in the level of difficulty. Movement to the next group was made by the oldest child in the group, regardless of the child's readiness or capability.

The accuracy of the expectations that the teachers held for their children varied among the teachers. Two teachers held accurate expectations for the performance of most of their children. One teacher held accurate expectations for only three of her 18 children. The inaccurate expectations were held for the children whom they liked, disliked and did not interact. Too high expectations were held for the children they liked and many of the children they did not interact with, and too low expectations were held for the children they disliked.

Theme Four: Children's Awareness of Teacher's Expectations

Many four-year-old children are aware of the rules the

teachers have for classroom procedures and behavior, although some children are better able to verbalize their awareness than others. The teachers have expectations for appropriate behavior and the children are capable of accurately perceiving these expectations. Following these rules is another matter. Several of the children I interacted with were those who fell into the dislike category. Interestingly, many of these children knew the rules and told me that they were not going to follow them, knew the consequences, and said they would continue the inappropriate behavior after being reprimanded or punished. During my observations, I was concerned that many children did not understand the meanings behind the teacher's uses of vague instructions such as "Do what you are supposed to", and "... when you are ready", but most of the children did understand what was expected.

## DISCUSSION

Teachers of four-year-old children have expectations for their student's social behavior and academic performance. These expectations are based on a variety of information about the child's capabilities, age and maturity, family situations and other characteristics. The expectations may or not be accurate. Teachers tend to like, dislike, interact inconsistently or do not interact with their children. The children in each group share similar characteristics and are interacted with in similar ways. The children, although young, are able to perceive and interpret the expectations their teachers have for their social behavior.

Implications for Preschool Teachers

1. Teachers of young children need to be aware of certain child characteristics and behaviors that lead to the formation of more positive and encouraging interactions as well as more negative and unsupportive interactions. Teachers should periodically confront their feelings about and interactions with their children and notice similarities in child characteristics and behavior patterns.

2. Teachers should be aware of the messages they may communicate to young children through differential treatment patterns.

3. Expectations should be formed upon accurate information about a child's capability, actual ability level and performance. Expectations should be adjusted to reflect a child's intellectual and social growth. Accurate expectations are critically important because they allow teachers to set realistic academic goals, to individualize instruction and to create a classroom climate in which student effort pays off in increased performance (Boersma & Chapman, 1982).

4. Teachers should have access to formal and informal feedback about the accuracy of their expectations. The first step in forming positive relationships with students is understanding how the self-fulfilling prophecy operates and the dangers involved with forming inaccurate beliefs, attitudes and expectations (Patriarca & Kragt, 1986).

5. Negative expectations which are formed before kindergarten may affect children's behavior and performance for many years.

Young children who have been treated in unhelpful and discouraging ways by their preschool teachers may experience academic difficulty when they begin formal schooling.

6. Teachers should be aware of the young children who may be socially rejected and aid these children in acquiring appropriate social skills. The promotion of positive social reputations is important because these children may be more amenable to change while they are younger (Poteat, Ironsmith & Bullock, 1986).

7. Teachers of young children should create an environment which encourages child success. Positive interactions should occur between the teachers and children and among the children themselves.

8. Teachers of young children should be aware of how their words and actions may influence children's developing self-concepts. A child's self-concept is developed and formulated during the critical years before kindergarten. Within the classroom, teachers can enhance children's self-concepts by providing a predictable environment with clear and reasonable rules. Reasons for the limits placed on behavior should be explained, and appropriate behavior should be modeled by the teacher.

9. Teachers should consider the children's capability to understand and internalize the meaning behind teacher's actions and words. Four-year-old children are capable of understanding implicit rules and unspoken consequences established by their teachers.

Future Research

This ground-breaking ethnographic study attempts to explain the phenomena of teachers expectations for four-year-old children but also raises many more questions that will need to be addressed in future research. The future research directions are as follows:

1. Add the parental perspective to the study. Ask the parents the same types of questions the teachers were asked during the interviews.
2. Add a longitudinal perspective. Follow the four-year-old children into public school kindergarten. Be aware of the child's behavior patterns and the new teachers' responses. In cases of both positive and negative expectations, is the self-fulfilling prophecy cycle evident?
3. Race, gender and socioeconomic status variables were not closely examined in this study. Further research should examine the connection between these variables and the categories of children derived from this study.
4. Investigate more closely the children whom the teachers interact with inconsistently and also those children with whom the teachers do not interact. More explanation about these phenomena is needed.
5. Do the teachers of even younger children have expectations or their children and are the expectations relayed in similar ways? At what age do teachers develop expectations? Are the expectations accurate? A longitudinal study which follows the development of a group of children from infancy through

kindergarten would provide valuable information into the formation of expectations, and the subsequent effects the expectations may have on the children's developing self-concepts.

This research attempts to add a significant extension to the expectation research which has been conducted with kindergarten through college students. Teachers do have expectations for the social behavior and academic performance of four-year-old children. The expectations are relayed to the students in a variety of ways and are based on various types of information. This area is important to study because of the potential effects negative self-fulfilling prophecies can have on young children's developing self-concepts. According to the findings of this study, evidence of self-fulfilling prophecies being alive and well in classrooms with four-year-old children was found.

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